Aspirations and sex: Coming of age in western Kenya in a context of HIV
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Chapter 6

Sex, love, and money

1. Introduction: Okoth and Akinyi

Any account of the sexual relationships between the young people of Winam needs not only to analyse their livelihood aspirations and expectations but also to conduct this analysis through a lens of intergenerational relations, the context in which traditions are passed on, and transformed (Cole and Durham 2007b: 2–3). In contrast to earlier generations, youngsters during the time of my fieldwork are drawn into a world of consumerism and urban life associated with fashion. Before examining in depth the relationship of two lovers, Akinyi and Okoth, I will provide some background on their lives. Akinyi’s life story, emphasizing her mobility, was introduced earlier in Chapter 4; we begin here with the story of Okoth.

I came to know Okoth as a tough person who doesn’t use many words, and on the few occasions that he does talk, it is usually in an abusive, rude manner. He is a hard-working person, but he only was unable to finish primary school due to financial limitations. In the morning hours, he could be found herding cattle and in the afternoon, he was usually at Yeshica, the HIV/AIDS prevention project in Winam, attending a vocational training or meeting. One of the first members of Yeshica, and a member of the Post-Test Club (PTC), Okoth was always present at the rehearsals and outreach events of the PTC theatre group. This group performed sketches on issues related to HIV/AIDS, and Okoth was an important actor and rapper in the group. Although it was ‘volunteer work’, Okoth perceived the PTC outreach events as his main job: participating in the group provided him with 200 Kenyan shillings (about 2.5 euro) twice a week, funding that came from the Youth Intervention Program (YIP) through PEPFAR (see Chapters 2 and 7). Okoth used this money to buy second-hand clothes for himself and gave some of the money to his girlfriends. Luckily, he did not have to worry about food since his mother provided that. Okoth dreamt of becoming a famous rapper one day and, by acting for Yeshica, he hoped that one day somebody would acknowledge his talent and give him a job as an artist. When the outreach events came to an end, Okoth and many others did not find other income.
After we had left the field, a serious incident further deteriorated Okoth’s situation. His father, a pastor of the traditional Nomiya Church, had a conflict with Okoth’s mother, which resulted in chasing Okoth, his mother, and his sister out of the compound; we heard later that they had to relocate to Kisumu. Rumours about the incident helped my research assistant Petronella and I to realise that Okoth and his sister were born out of wedlock, which meant that ultimately Okoth’s ‘father’ had little actual responsibility for Okoth. Becoming seen as a child born out of wedlock meant that Okoth had no claim on family land, which limited his livelihood opportunities.

On an ordinary day in April 2005, I was drinking a chai (tea) at the restaurant where Akinyi, a 16-year-old young woman, was working (see also Chapter 4). Okoth, who was about 19 years old at that time, was also there drinking chai. I heard later from Ochien’g (a 22-year-old fisherman from Dhonam, who was also a participant of Yeshica), who is Akinyi’s maternal uncle, that Okoth had come to the restaurant to admire Akinyi’s appearance. Okoth had already asked Ochien’g about her background, as he really wanted Akinyi to become his girlfriend. Akinyi had noticed Okoth when he performed theatre for Yeshica at the market, and she knew that he and Ochien’g were good friends. Okoth invited her to visit him at his ‘workplace,’ Yeshica. From then onwards, they started to meet each other on a regular basis at Ochien’g’s place in Dhonam, where Akinyi stayed when her mother was in prison, or at Okoth’s home, about 20 minutes walking distance from Dhonam.

In May 2005, Akinyi returned to her home, about half a day’s walk (or two hours by bicycle) from Dhonam, to live with her mother, MinAkinyi, who had just been released from prison, and to help take care of her father, who had come back from living in Kisumu with a severe illness. The greater distance did not stop her from visiting Okoth. On one occasion, Akinyi stayed at Okoth’s for several days, and rumours reached MinAkinyi that “Akinyi osetedo” (Akinyi has gotten married). Her mother hurried to Dhonam to learn Akinyi’s whereabouts, and finally found Akinyi harvesting millet at Okoth’s home. MinAkinyi asked Okoth’s mother why she had allowed Okoth and Akinyi to get married, when MinAkinyi had yet to give permission. Okoth’s mother denied that they were married, saying that Okoth could not marry because tradition requires that the firstborn son marry first, before his younger brothers. MinAkinyi took her daughter back home and scolded her. She was not happy that Okoth’s mother treated her daughter as a worker and allowed her son to sleep with her before they were married.
Akinyi continued visiting Okoth, but Okoth no longer wanted to visit Akinyi because his ego was hurt by MinAkinyi’s protestations. In the meantime, a policeman from Mombasa, who had come to visit his home in Winam, approached Akinyi and asked for her hand. MinAkinyi, who knew the mother of the policeman very well, likely arranged the proposal. She hoped Akinyi would choose the policeman instead of Okoth since the policeman was more financially stable. At first, Akinyi refused because she did not know him, but the opportunity to move to Mombasa, away from village life, with a salaried man, was attractive. The man called Jack paid for her travel to Mombasa in July 2005, but just two weeks later Akinyi returned home. Everyone could tell she had been to town because she returned with a totally different look. She had extensions added to her hair and was wearing it plaited with red colour at the ends; she was also wearing grey sunglasses and a long, fitted dress with slits up both sides. Despite her glamorous new look, which seemed to suggest success, she told me that her stay in Mombasa was not positive: “I do not like the ‘Mombasa man’ because he has too many other girlfriends whom he even brought to the house in my presence”.

Two days after returning from Mombasa, Akinyi told me she wanted to visit Okoth but was having trouble tracking him down. They finally both met at my place in Dhonam. Akinyi, who had been wearing a leso (long skirt), removed it to reveal a short, red skirt clearly worn to attract Okoth, as it revealed her beautiful, long legs. I left them alone to talk, and Akinyi later informed me that she would spend the night at Okoth’s bachelor’s hut (simba).

A few months later, in October, Akinyi moved to Nairobi to work as a domestic maid as her financial contribution to her parent’s household was needed. Although far from Winam, Akinyi tried to keep track of Okoth by calling me and her friends, using a simu ya jamii (community phone). She told us: “I heard that nowadays he is modern, he is getting girls from [outside Winam]”. When Akinyi returned home from Nairobi at the end of December 2005, she visited Okoth a couple of times for the purpose of “doing research” to confirm the rumour that he was going out with different girlfriends. Another young man, Josh, who was interested in her, gave her the most information about Okoth’s promiscuous behaviour.

When I asked Akinyi if they always used condoms, she told me that Okoth kept condoms in his simba, but they never had used one. She decided to leave Okoth, telling his sisters-in-law that it was “because of his character of out-going” (i.e., he was dating too many women). Without telling Okoth directly that she was leaving him, she disappeared for a while. Three months later, in March 2006, Okoth informed me that he
saw Akinyi walking with another young man at one of the biggest markets of Winam and started quarrelling with her. He urged her to come and see him but Akinyi ignored his request. Again in June 2006, they crossed paths in Dhonam and Okoth approached her once again. In conversation with me, Okoth wondered how she could come to Dhonam without telling him or visiting him. Later he told me: “She wants me to beg for her. Me, I do not have the time for begging her”.

Akinyi’s and Okoth’s story is typical of premarital sexual relationships among young people in Winam. As the two go back and forth in their relationship, we see how different aspects such as sexual pleasure, emotional attachment, generational ties, and economic motivations are interwoven in the fabric of their relationship. The story also illustrates the ways that their livelihood concerns and opportunities influence their choices and how intergenerational relations shape their sexual relationship.

Akinyi and Okoth enjoyed being together and experimenting with sex. Akinyi, in addition to finding Okoth handsome, was charmed by Okoth’s theatre performances and his status of being ‘employed’. Okoth was aware that his social status was enhanced by his Yeshica activities, and exploited this to attract more girlfriends. Although neither Akinyi nor Okoth had considered marriage, Akinyi’s mother had imagined that sexual experimentation should lead to marriage. Facing poverty at home, she hoped for a more responsible and financially capable husband for Akinyi, someone who would be able to pay a bride price; this illustrates how expectations for sexual relationships among young people differ between the generations (explored in more depth later in this chapter). For MinAkininy, the ‘Mombasa man’, the son of a family friend, seemed to be more “serious” than Okoth. Since he was employed as a policeman in a big town, MinAkininy assumed he had the financial means to take care of Akinyi. Akinyi accepted the offer because of her urban aspirations, as she wanted to move upward, like other young women of Winam. Moving upward through schooling had not been an option for her, or for her parents and grandparents, and she understood that through a sexual liaison with a wealthy man she could get access to desirable consumer goods and commodities, otherwise unavailable in conventional rural life. After a stay of two weeks, Akinyi tactically left the policeman (see Chapter 4) and came home with a new fashionable, urban look. Whereas Minakinyi still valued ‘arranged marriages’, Akinyi felt she could not stay with a man when there was no love regardless of his financial capabilities, and certainly not when he was promiscuous (see also later).
When Okoth heard the rumours that Akinyi had left for Mombasa, he had given up on Akinyi, as he knew his position in society: He was a younger man with less money who could not compete with an urban, salaried man. He was also not the eldest son in the homestead, but instead was a child without paternity. As a consequence, Okoth was not in a position to choose when to marry and risked losing his girlfriend as a result. Akinyi did not know of Okoth’s poor background, as he had introduced himself as someone working for Yeshica. Moreover, Akinyi loved Okoth, and, once back in Winam from Mombasa, she did her best to attract him physically. While Okoth chose not to think about Akinyi’s previous boyfriends, Akinyi was a bit naïve, thinking she was his only lover when in actuality, Okoth was known for having many girlfriends. And while Okoth thought it obvious that Akinyi would continue to visit him, despite the fact that she might have different boyfriends as well, Akinyi had another perception of sexual relationships. These different perceptions and expectations of young people are important to clarify if one wants to understand young people’s pragmatic choices.

This chapter is about sex, love, and money, each of which, though intertwined, has different significations for different people, and the meanings of which may change according to circumstances and time. The way young people perceive and give meaning to sex, love, and money is a product of complex socioeconomic and historical processes, and is influenced by gender norms and relationships. Shedding light on young people’s perceptions of and practices related to sex, love, and money within an intergenerational context demonstrates how socioeconomic changes have affected traditional gender roles and consequently, how ‘transactional’ sexual relationships can reproduce or disrupt gendered inequalities. In this way, this chapter helps to broaden our understanding of the notion of ‘transactional sex’, and to disentangle the stereotypes concerning female subordination, male dominance, and sex-for-money exchanges in sexual relationships.

I start this chapter with a critical analysis of the concept of ‘transactional sex’, followed by a theoretical explanation of why the constellation of perceptions and practices that I am identifying as ‘sex, love, and money’ should be viewed through an intergenerational lens. I then describe how young people deal with sex and the art of seduction, illustrating how both young men and women make use of creative, and sometimes manipulative, ploys to win over sexual partners. I explain the meaning of money/gift exchanges in young people’s sexual relationships and analyse typical situations in which money/gift exchanges occur. After tackling the money/gift exchange aspect of sexual relationships, the last section examines the role of emotional
attachment in young people’s intimate relationships, and how this forms part of their ‘modern’ identity.

2. ‘Transactional sex’: A critical analysis of the concept

Gifts and money play a vital role in many sexual relationships between young men and young women in sub-Saharan Africa (Hunter 2002; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004). In the public health literature, the exchange of money or gifts for sex between casual or long-term sexual partners is usually described as ‘transactional sex’ (Nnko and Pool 1997; Hunter 2002; Leclerc-Madlala 2004). The concept of ‘transactional sex’ is used to emphasize the centrality of material exchanges to everyday sexual relations and to clearly differentiate the practice from ‘commercial sex’ and ‘prostitution’ with their stigmatizing connotations (Hunter 2002; Cole 2007). Transactional sex is different from prostitution because “the exchange is not necessarily a straightforward cash transaction and sex is not pursued on a professional basis” (Leclerc-Madlala 2004: 3). Obligation can be generated, however, by accepting gifts and favours from men; women understand that by doing so, they may be agreeing to engage in sex (Meekers and Calves 1997; Hunter 2002). In most of the literature on transactional sex, which is extensive, it is argued that due to poverty and economic dependence on men, women engage in ‘survival sex’, i.e., women need money for survival and sex is one of the only ways to get it (e.g., Schoepf 1988, 1992; Hunter 2002; Luke 2003; Leclerc-Madlala 2004). Qualitative researchers often make the distinction between women’s basic survival/subsistence needs and their needs for fashion or consumption goods, such as body cream, cell phones, and clothes (Hunter 2002; Leclerc-Madlala 2004). Young women whose access to resources is limited may also use transactional sex to help advance their education or gain employment or business opportunities (Hunter 2002; Nyanzi et al. 2001; Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004).

It is important to understand that money and material resources can take on different meanings in different situations and kinds of relationships. A number of qualitative scholars have illustrated that in many sexual relationships, gift giving is understood to be a natural part of a relationship that may or may not result in coercion or a loss of negotiating power (e.g., Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Luke 2003; Leclerc-Madlala 2003; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004: 3; Poulin 2007). Dunkle et al. (2007) for instance, finds it important to make a distinction between financial or material transfers that function as ‘gifts’ and those that function as ‘transactions’. A gift is an
expression of respect and care, and does not necessarily imply that one must engage in sex, whereas a transaction is perceived to motivate the other to engage in sex. Gift and transaction motives, however, can coexist and overlap, and sometimes the sexual partners may have different understandings of the meaning of the transfer (Dunkle et al. 2007). Although Dunkle et al.’s reasoning is clear, based on my experience in the field, this is more of a conceptually imposed distinction than what I found in practice. It is difficult for either sexual partner to differentiate between gift and transaction, as they overlap and merge into one another. Usually, it is a mix of both motives since both gifts and transactions are part and parcel of the courting practices of young women and men.

Although I argue in this chapter that reciprocity and exchange are part of social life, gender power relations, and subsequently sexual relationships, are seldom fully equal. This holds for Kenya but also for countless other locations and societies. In a capitalist society, where financial resources are a key, determining factor for a secure livelihood, financial needs mesh with existing gendered power imbalances in the realm of sexual relations. Many transactions in social fields are structured in ways that benefit some and disadvantage others. Both neo-Marxist and feminist scholars have argued that certain groups (women, labourers) can exert agency, but that structural arrangements impart to them (as groups) more limited opportunities than those enjoyed by the dominant strata.

In the biomedical and public health discourses, the gender inequality that characterizes transactional relationships is often perceived as one of the main driving forces for the continued spread of HIV/AIDS (Glynn et al. 2001; Kelly et al. 2003). Many scholars stress that women, especially young women, are vulnerable to engaging in what is called ‘risky behaviours’. Women face a greater risk because they are biologically more susceptible to infection with the virus (Higgins et al. 2010). They are also assumed to have a weaker negotiating position concerning condom use as it is usually the man who decides whether or not a condom is used (Meekers and Calves 1997; Nyanzi et al. 2001; MacPhail and Campbell 2001; Luke and Kurz 2002; Hunter 2002). Some women may also be confronted with rape and physical violence from men when they refuse to reciprocate with sex (Wood and Jewkes 2001).

Paul Farmer (1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2003), physician and medical anthropologist, played an important role in emphasizing that not biological or cultural barriers but the combination of poverty and gender inequality facilitated the spread of HIV (and tuberculosis and other infectious diseases) (see also Chapter 3). By unravelling the political economies of the regions where he carried out research (Haiti
and Peru), he demonstrated how these processes have contributed to the continuous lack of financial resources for the health of many of his informants. His ‘vulnerability discourse’ (also described as 'structural violence'), in which the low socioeconomic status of young persons, and in particular young women, was associated with an increased exposure to HIV infection, was quickly incorporated into biomedical and public health discourses (see for instance, Glynn et al. 2001; Luke and Kurz 2002; Kelly et al. 2003).

The association of young women with vulnerability allowed many public health workers to assume that young women are at higher risk for HIV infection than adults because they engage with older male partners, often referred to as ‘sugar daddies’. These older men are of particular concern because they often have higher infection rates than young men. The age and economic asymmetries that are part of a wider set of gender power differences further limit adolescent girls’ power to negotiate ‘safe’ sexual behaviours (Silberschmidt and Rash 2001; Luke and Kurz 2002: 3–4; Luke 2003; Luke 2005a: Luke 2005b). Sexual liaisons between teachers and students, for instance, are one of these power-imbalanced relationships with (sometimes large) age differentials. In exchange for passing marks or help with homework, female students have sex with older male teachers (Mensch and Lloyd 1998; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004: 4–5).

However, Luke (2005a) demonstrates in her study in Kisumu that the magnitude of the ‘sugar daddies’ phenomenon is not as significant as generally assumed: only four percent of all sexual relationships in the sample qualified as ‘sugar daddy’ relationships. Her research also contradicted the assumption that adolescent girls are more at risk than older women (Luke 2005a: 119–120) because “adolescent girls are generally more likely to receive money or gifts for sex than older women” (Luke 2006: 114). Her study stressed one should not make a differentiation based on age and assume that adolescent girls are more vulnerable than adult women. All women, independent of their age, are at risk of unsafe sexual behaviour in transactional relationships (Luke 2005a: 119–120).

In much of the public health literature, women are mainly described as poor and powerless, and sometimes even as being passionless (for more on this critique, see Tawfik and Watkins 2007). Men, on the other hand, are perceived to be economically and socially dominant and unable to control their sexual needs. Yet, masculinity and femininity are both social constructs, which vary through time and space, and both are subject to internal ambivalences, contextually conditioned fluctuations, and historical disruptions (see also Connell 1995). Recently several researchers have started to challenge stereotyped notions of gender, providing alternative perspectives on the ‘sex-for-money exchange’ debate. In particular, they have highlighted that not all male-to-
female money or gift exchange in sexual relationships is coercive or exploitative. Women are not always passive victims just because they are poor and have limited opportunities; they are often also negotiating agents who do not necessarily always reproduce but can also challenge patriarchal structures (Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Hunter 2002; Leclerc-Madlala 2004; Poulin 2007; Verheijen 2013). Several authors emphasise that women have considerable decision-making control over the process of relationship formation and termination (Luke 2006; Poulin 2007; Van der Sijpt 2011; Verheijen 2013). In her dissertation, Van der Sijpt (2011) shows how “pregnant bodies still have room for individual management and tactical manipulation”; women may resort to abortions, for example, if pregnancy may be considered a hindrance to urban respectability. Spronk’s (2006: 163) study of young unmarried professionals in Nairobi found that sexual pleasure among young women, who felt appreciated and ‘sexy’ in their interaction with their partner, became “symbolic of their identity as a contemporary woman”. Sexual pleasure was thus no longer perceived as exclusive to being married, and was tied more strongly, instead, to being ‘modern’ (Spronk 2006). Notions of transactional sex that only highlight the economic dimensions of these exchanges minimize the role of emotions in intimate relationships.

Emphasising conflict and inequality excludes notions of love and tenderness and de facto reproduces and confirms unequal power relations, albeit unintentionally (Spronk 2006; van Eerdewijk 2006; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006; Thomas and Cole 2009). This parallels the way in which 19th-century missionaries and European colonialists stressed the hypersexuality of ‘Africans’, depicting African marriages as lacking deep emotional attachment (Curtin 1964, cited in Thomas and Cole 2009: 8; see also Vaughan 1991; Thomas 2009). According to Thomas and Cole (2009: 8), such racist accounts depicted “lust as omnipresent and love as absent in Africa”. The much-criticized epidemiological study of Caldwell et al. (1989) built upon these old discourses by saying that ‘African sexuality’ is characterized by “permissiveness” and that most African marriage bonds are loose (Caldwell et al. 1989: 195). Early campaigns against HIV/AIDS at first reinforced these portrayals of Africa, often laying blame on ‘African promiscuity’ while excluding the wider range of contextual factors that are responsible for the AIDS epidemic (Silberschmidt 2001: 257–258). In this way, intimate relations were reduced to sex, and the role of emotions in having sex was overlooked. Following Wardlow and Hirsch (2006: 3), if we want to study gendered relationships, we need to consider the “socially, politically and economically structured inequalities within which couples negotiate and the possibilities for tenderness, pleasure and cooperation that exist in spite of these
inequalities”. It is therefore important to present a nuanced and holistic notion of gender as well as the interrelationships between ‘sex, love, and money’.

Finally, an important part of the larger context that has started to receive attention in the study of transactional relationships within the HIV/AIDS literature is the importance of intergenerational relations; for example, Cole (2007: 78) argues we must study youthful practice “relationally with respect to the larger intergenerational matrix of which it is a part”. In her study on transactional sex among young people in Madagascar, Cole (2007: 78) invites us to analyse young people within their web of ‘intergenerational relations’ rather than emphasizing simply youth culture and youth agency, “separating youth off from the families and communities in which they live”. Powerful economic constraints that shape youthful practices are important to analyse, but so are the consequences of youngsters’ actions for the families in which they are presumably embedded (Cole 2007). In her study, Cole (2007: 79) stresses how the youngsters of Tamatave (Madagascar) have reworked transactional sex practices from the past, and how these ‘new’ practices reshape the ways in which families are currently being created and may be sustained in the future (see also Durham 2007).

3. Sex, love, and money through an intergenerational lens

Young women’s practice of exchanging sex for money has a long history in Kenya (see White 1990). Most literature about colonial times only focussed on the transactional element of sexual relationships and rarely took into account emotional content. According to Cole (2007: 79), youth draw on these old practices of transactional sex but enact them in a new context, which in their turn shapes the content of these practices in novel ways (see also Mannheim’s concept of ‘fresh contact’ in Chapter 5).

Cole (2007: 83) writes that in Madagascar, where young women’s practices of transactional sex existed long before colonialism, and where high formal unemployment has accompanied the rise of the consumer economy, youth have been increasingly drawn into consumerism. She discusses the distinction between tanora and jeunes, both of which refer to youth. The concept of tanora encompasses an older understanding of youth, while jeunes invokes both the new category of ‘consumer youth’ and the old practices of tanora that are now enacted in new circumstances:

In contrast to tanora, with its emphasis on productive labour and growth rooted in and, ultimately contributing to, the flourishing of families and ancestors, the concept of jeunes combines older rural ideas about the sexually playful nature of youth with a new emphasis on sophisticated individual consumption as a means to self-realization. Where
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Tanora emphasizes productive labour and the local construction of value, jeunes highlights the role of consumption of foreign goods and the localization of value perceived to come from outside. And where tanora emphasizes generational growth, jeunes emphasizes an individual’s improvement of his or her material circumstances (Cole 2007: 84–85).

This distinction could also be applied to the context of Winam, where the period of tanora was the time when the grandparents and parents of the youngsters with whom I worked were still youngsters, and the period of jeunes was the time of my fieldwork, when the youngsters with whom I worked were perceived as being part of the new, younger generation.

The structural context of Winam’s youngsters during the time of my research was in a constant state of transformation. In the past, the grandfathers and fathers of the young people with whom I worked with could seek success and upward mobility through schooling, but this was no longer the case during my fieldwork. Education no longer gives youngsters the assurance of finding a job. At the same time, most of the youngsters have left the agricultural livelihood of their parents, ending up in the unpredictable informal sector. These socioeconomic changes combined with the emerging mass media culture have transformed the meanings of sexual relationships and the notions of sex, love, and money, as I will demonstrate in this chapter.

Like the jeunes of Cole’s (2007) study in Madagascar, the young people of Winam drew on the old practices from the time of the elders’ youth. Just as in the past, sexual experimentation remains important, although the expectation that sexual play should ultimately end with marriage and the birth of children has undergone some change. At the time of my fieldwork, (informal) marriages were being delayed, and the period of searching and trying out many different pathways seemed to be never-ending, due to livelihood insecurity. Young people were not finding the financial security they were looking for in a marriage. Despite their marginal position, young people had high aspirations and expectations about their future, and they believed in social change: their urban aspirations and desires for new, foreign clothes and commodities were part of being a youngster in Winam. It is within this new context of consumerism, economic marginalization, and desire for an urban lifestyle that we need to analyse how sexual relations come about.

4. The art of seduction

With the shift towards urban lifestyles and the emergence of the consumer economy, new emphases on individual consumption and romantic self-expression have come to
play an important role. Young people desire luxury consumer items from outside Winam, trying to follow the fashions and stay ‘up-to-date’. I want to dispel the notion, often assumed by urbanites, that rural youngsters are all trapped in a traditional life of agriculture. Based on my fieldwork, these youngsters live in a ‘global village’ that is characterized by high mobility between the town and the villages, even if they are economically marginalized and lacking financial resources to acquire desirable goods.

For young men and women in Winam, various reasons—such as physical attraction, sexual pleasure, emotional attachment, economic motivations, and social norms—came into play to explain why one lover was preferred over another, or why someone had several lovers at the same time. For young women, the additional factor of money came more to the foreground when they considered potential boyfriends. This was not only due to the fact that most of the young women in Winam were in a more economically dependent position because they had unequal access to resources, but also because young women expected that their boyfriends would provide for them, as this was one of the social roles assigned to men.

For most of the grandparents and parents of the youngsters I followed, a ‘good husband’ was a financially capable man, someone able to take care of his girlfriends and wives. Or, as Francis (2000: 164) writes, a ‘good husband’ was someone “who could provide enough money to feed the household, as well as providing clothing, household goods and school fees”. While men were expected to provide for women, many failed to live up to these expectations. Due to high unemployment, the rural young men of Winam struggled to find the means to contribute to their natal household, support their siblings, and provide money or gifts in exchange for sexual favours. In order to be seen as ‘real men’, young men needed to seduce women. Although one might expect young women to act demurely, their role in seducing young men should not be underestimated. While in previous generations, young women could just be approached by their future spouse at home, at the time of my fieldwork it seemed that young women actively had to seek out a spouse or lover in order to acquire the consumer goods they desired and pursue their urban aspirations.

In this section, I discuss the ‘rules’ of the seduction game and young men’s creative tactics in seducing young women, especially the use of “sweet-talking” (i.e., using ‘nice words’, or promising to provide). Following that, I discuss the meaning of money in contemporary sexual relationships among youngsters in Winam.
4.1. The ‘rules’ of the seduction game in Winam

In Winam, young men were expected to take an active role in approaching girls or young women, and to compete with other men in order to prove their virility. Male youngsters gave many reasons why they preferred a certain young woman to another, among which the most important was that they wanted to experiment with sex and were attracted by the woman’s beauty. When a young man set his eyes on a beautiful young woman, he would do whatever he could to seduce her. Any female ‘newcomer’, someone just visiting Winam, was usually the attraction of the day, since she had not been “tried out” yet. Young men reasoned that they had to be quick in their efforts to seduce her since she might be going home the next day, and, more importantly, another young man might succeed.

Most of the male youngsters that I followed explained that they commonly approached a girl or young woman they admired through a ‘go-between’: a close female or male friend or relative who knew her, could serve as an intermediary, and could keep a secret. Okoth admitted that young men would not easily share their feelings about a certain young woman with another male friend because they saw each other as rivals who might compete for the same girl. Moreover, if a young man kept expressing his feelings about a woman to his friends, it was thought that he was incapable of approaching her and expressing his feelings to her, signifying that he was not a ‘real man’. Okoth felt safe to use Ochien’g as a go-between when he wanted to approach Akinyi because Ochien’g was Akinyi’s uncle, and would not have any interest in her. Onyango, a 17-year-old schoolboy at the time of my research, was often asked to act as a go-between because he usually kept his word, and because he was familiar with a number of girls and young women because he worked at the soda stand during school holidays.

Onyango’s friend Omosah urged Onyango to introduce him to Eunice, a young woman Onyango had just met along the road while they were both strolling. Onyango at first did not want to present Omosah to Eunice, stating that he disliked her “because she is after money”. However, Onyango’s refusal made Omosah suspects that Onyango was involved with her. To prove the contrary, Onyango finally agreed to act as a go-between. Here is an excerpt from Onyango’s diary:

“Around 9:30 am, my schoolmate Omosah paid me a visit and asked me to stroll with him. As we were strolling, we met Eunice as she was going to buy a soda. I called her to greet us. She came to greet us and told me that she had a bone to chew with me. She told me to see her before the next day to discuss the issue. After she had left us, Omosah asked me if Eunice is my girlfriend. I told him “no,” and asked him why he was asking that question. He just kept quiet, and then he said:

“Onyango, I have [just] fallen in love with that girl and I don’t know how I can see her”.
“Just chill, you are still a schoolboy”, I said to him quietly.

“The way you are talking, it seems Eunice is your lover”, he added.

“I don’t know how you are reasoning”, I said loudly.

“If Eunice is not your girlfriend then why are you telling me to chill”, Omosah told me angrily. After that I told him that I thought I was helping him, but to him I was helpless so I promised him that girl.

“Now you are a good friend, I can accept you”, Omosah said happily.

Me, I dislike Eunice because she is after money. I knew that if I would tell Omosah those things, he might think that I don’t want him to be Eunice’s boyfriend, so I just kept those thoughts in my mind. After we had reached my room, Omosah immediately asked me to go and invite Eunice, and I just obeyed and went to look for her. At first, she refused to come but later I convinced her and she agreed to accompany me to my room. I didn’t inform her about Omosah and we just sat.

“Actually, Onyango, what were you calling me for?”, Eunice asked me politely. I didn’t utter a word but I started laughing. Eunice felt like leaving the room but I told her to relax a bit.

“To your opinion, what are you here for?”, I asked her but she was unable to reply. After that I told her that Omosah has cast his eyes on her so she can decide what to do about it and she just laughed.

“What Onyango has told you is true and I am serious about it”, Omosah said.

After that I told Omosah to utter his speeches, and I also informed the girl to be frank with him. Surely it turned to be a debate and I thought to leave them since they might want to tell each other some secrets. Eunice realized and quickly said: “Onyango, don’t you move [leave] because I cannot hide anything from you”. Eunice cheated (i.e., lied to) Omosah that she has no boyfriend and that she doesn’t want one. She claimed that there are more demerits than merits in having a boyfriend.

“Love shouldn’t be forced therefore if Eunice is not willing, you look for another girl”, I said.

“Furthermore, I don’t want to be pregnant”, she added.

“Does it mean that lovers must enjoy sex, we can love each other without sex”, Omosah said to her. “If so, then we will use CD (a condom)”. Omosah added but Eunice refused.

After that I “sweet-talked” her myself and she immediately changed her mind and she agreed to be Omosah’s girlfriend. After that she told us that the following day she would pay Omosah a visit. She left hurriedly, as there was no one to serve customers at her hotel.

Someone serving as a go-between could make a little business from it, asking for something in return for his efforts to convince a young woman. Onyango did this at times, as illustrated in the next excerpt from his diary:

Odipo asked me: “I have admired Caroline for a long time and she refused to be my girlfriend. If you are used to Caroline then you can convince her to be my lover. Please!”

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“Will you give me a present if I convince her?” I asked Odipo.

“Yes, I will give you anything you ask for”, Odipo replied, adding, “I want to receive reply on Friday.” But I told him: “Wait till Monday”.

“Monday you will find me in school and I need Caroline before we start school” (Odipo goes to a boarding school so once he is away at school, he hardly can see Caroline) (August 2005).

It was ultimately up to a young woman to accept or refuse a young man’s proposal. However, just as for young men, various reasons were at play when young women considered accepting young men’s proposals to start sexual relationships. In the case of Eunice, she said she refused Omosah’s proposal at first because she did not want to come across as an “easy girl” who could be easily convinced to engage in sex. According to Onyango, she refused because she did not see that she could get anything good from a schoolboy. Later, she agreed to be Omosah’s girlfriend because she did not want to disappoint Onyango and probably felt socially obligated. In the end, I do not know if she actually stuck to her promise to pay Omosah a visit (i.e., have sex) the following day. MinMercy, a young woman about 16 years old, on the other hand, accepted a proposed relationship out of fear of being forced into sex. Although she was still in primary school (Class 6), her older widowed sister had convinced her to start a relationship with Ochien’g, a 22-year-old fisherman, as he was respected for being tough. According to her sister, Ochien’g would protect her from being bothered by other boys and young men. The truth behind this story was actually that MinMercy’s sister was a young widow; since the death of her husband, a fisherman, she had received fish from Ochien’g. In exchange for the fish, she said that she would try to convince her sister to become involved with him: MinMercy indeed felt obligated to start a relationship with him.

If a girl or young woman kept on ignoring the sexual demands of a young man, he would often develop antipathy towards her. Young men felt very uncomfortable “losing to a girl”, which was why many did not give up in pursuing or “sweet-talking” a “difficult girl” until she gave in to having sex. The socially constructed division of gender roles reinforced the belief that men were in a dominant position to demand sex from their girlfriends whenever they wanted. Omosh, a 16-year-old orphan who dropped out of primary school and earned a living as a fisherman and musician, told us that he did not want to hear from a girl or young woman statements like: “I will think about it,” or “Later, I will give you an answer” because, he explained, “later does not exist. Nowadays it is one touch”. Like most of the young men, he believed that any young woman might be found later with another boyfriend, probably one who had more to offer financially. Others also mentioned that “the world of today has changed”, signifying that there were
more diseases and they could die tomorrow. Jeremiah, (a rather shy, 17-year-old boda boda (bicycle-taxi) operator, who had recently finished primary school), explained:

On my side, I approach her like: “Yes, I have seen you, you have caught my eye (I am attracted to you. What can we do? I love you so much”. So she is the one to see how she can answer me. And if she still meanders... sometimes she can tell you: “I will think about it”. Then I tell her: ‘There is nothing for you to think about. It is just a small issue that you respond to, then I leave, knowing it is a ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (focus group discussion, June 2006).

At another time, Petronella spoke with Augus (a 22-year-old matatu (mini-bus) driver who recently had finished secondary school), and he also expressed a similar attitude:

Augus: When I have a girlfriend to show that I love her and the girl also loves me, I must be able to hold her and have sex with her.

Petronella: What if she asks that you wait?

Augus: (Laughing.) Girls cannot hold, you can wait and someone steals her from you, someone will just take her to the social hall in Kisumu, buy her a drink, and cheat (i.e., lie to) her that he loves her then she gives in (informal conversation, November 2006).

For many young men in Winam, when two partners love each other, they must have sex. Moreover, love was a self-evident notion once the partners had engaged in sex; love became a synonym for sex, and showing love was associated with having sex.

Although young women were supposed to use subtle ways to relate to men because their sexual behaviour was subject to a different moral standard than that of the young men, in reality, women were sometimes very assertive in showing their interest in a certain man. In a conversation between two cousins, NyarAlego (19 years old, completed primary school) and MinMercy, they discussed how some young women were ‘misbehaving’ by trying to meet young men:

NyarAlego: Have you seen how the girls from Bur were behaving?

Ellen: What did the girls do?

NyarAlego: The girls from Bur were standing near the pitch talking to the boys who had come for football. Almost all these girls have children and are not married. They stay home with their children but during the school games, most of them came carrying their children and were out to meet new boyfriends.

(then talking directly to MinMercy) Even the one who was going out with one of my neighbours was around. She has spent the night at my neighbour’s.

MinMercy: Imagine, that is someone who is already married, and only came back to visit her parents, and she still goes out with her old boyfriend (informal conversation, October 2005).
While some used discreet ways to show their interest, others were more provocative. A number of young women used their body language in the hope of attracting men, or wearing clothes that transgressed social, such as a tight, fancy jeans and a “spaghetti top” (halter-style, sleeveless shirt), as Akinyi did when re-connecting with Okoth. Some would move their buttocks in such a way that they were, according to young men, “like a magnet”. At disco matangas, a number of young women came “poorly dressed”, in the sense that they wore very little. This also occurred at Yeshica meetings, where they hoped to attract staff members with their fashionable style of dress. Both male and female youngsters with whom I worked considered such dress and behaviour provocative, and said it invited men to have sex with them. Young women, Okoth said, knew how to “put a man on heat (set a man on fire)”. Others were subtler, giving just hints, for instance by giving a man a few extra things if he came to buy something at their kiosk, or by promising him something, such as giving him extra fish next time he came by.

In the dating field, young men and women admitted that there were many male and female competitors. Some could be fierce rivals, using all kinds of tricks to get the man or woman they wanted, ignoring whatever (emotional, financial, or reputational) grief this might cause their rival. Some did not try to attract a man or woman simply because they did not want to hurt their friend, while others told rumours about their friends to put them at a disadvantage. Josh, a friend of Okoth’s who was also interested in Akinyi, for example, tried to cast Okoth in a negative light by telling Akinyi stories of his cheating, saying: “Okoth loves girls. He goes to all the discos around near and far”. Josh also told her that sometimes while she was waiting for Okoth at his simba, he and Okoth used to meet other girlfriends and “they just finished (had sex) with them in the bush”.

Having multiple lovers was fairly common for many young men. Okoth used an interesting metaphor that he said helped him in “double dealing” (i.e., having two or more lovers simultaneously). Comparing human beings to fish, he reasoned that just as fish have no fixed partner, human beings also roam around and can have several sexual partners at the same time. He said:

For me, I can just convince a girl with politics. Just tell her reasonably: “You know, madam, even if we go back to the sides of the waters, fish can also chase one another and knock themselves on a stone. So with me, you know what is happening, I don’t want to hit a stone with the other man (I don’t want to collide with the other man). So let’s do this. For me, the time I have found you, is when you are mine, and the time you will be with the other man, you will be his. And don’t think that if you throw a club to hit a bird that you will hit one bird. You can throw a club on a tree and a pigeon sees you there,
Akuru will be there, Odwer will be there, Oyundi will be there. Don’t think that if it is Akuru that you wanted, is the one you will get. You can even hit Odwer and it falls down, and you can also hit two birds at the same time. So you can double deal and the time you will be with him, I wouldn’t want to know. And when you are with me, let him not know. So we will be like people who are swimming (focus group discussion, June 2006).

In this narrative, Okoth explained that different young men might be after the same young woman, or a young man might want one young woman but end up with a different one. The young men whom I followed also recognized that girls and young women had different boyfriends simultaneously. Some women ‘managed’ several lover(s): they had one for sex, one they really loved, one who was the most handsome, and one for money. Okoth mentioned that a young woman should not tell her other boyfriend(s) about him, nor should she tell him about them. Rather than fidelity, he said, what mattered to him was getting the young woman’s complete attention when they were together. When Akinyi left for Mombasa, Okoth ignored the rumour of another man; what counted for him was that whenever Akinyi was in Dhonam, he wanted to enjoy sex with her, but he did not want to know about her other boyfriends. Okoth’s metaphor, importantly, goes against all HIV/AIDS prevention messages, since he had multiple lovers and Akinyi had her man in Mombasa, and they never used a condom when having sex.

The seduction game encompasses a veiled space where young women and young men challenged the dominant discourse on female sexual passivity and male dominance. Young women found creative and often partially hidden ways to express their desires and also had decision-making power about the starting or ending of sexual relationships. This took place in the obscurity of simbas, but also in public spaces like markets and disco matangas, under what I would call the ‘cover of the openness’. The public nature of these places and events provided an opportunity for nonconformist behaviour and ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott 1990). The seduction game had an economic aspect, as well. Due to the difficulty in making a livelihood in Winam and the expectation that males should be providers, young women were often ‘lured’ into sexual relationships with the promise that their boyfriend would take care of them, even if only temporarily. This is reflected in the way especially young men try to “sweet-talk” young women into sexual relationships.

4.2 “Sweet-talking”

Rambo was the ‘playboy' of Dhonam. Again and again he managed to ‘hook up’ with girls and young women in the village, as well as with “newcomers”. He was definitely a
specialist in “sweet-talking” girls, and his creativity when approaching girls and young women was impressive. To attract young women, he showed off his financial success, because he believed—correctly—that most women like men who have access to money. As a 23-year-old teacher in the primary school, he was quite popular among the young women and students. But in order to impress Petronella, my research assistant who, with her Bachelor’s degree in anthropology, was more highly educated than him, Rambo thought he needed to invent an additional story. Petronella wrote in her field notes:

I walk to Ong’ielo and find Lilly (19-year-old participant in Yeshica, secondary school leaver) standing with a bicycle outside a house. I stop to greet her. Rambo comes out of the house with a bicycle. I did not know that this is his home. They greet me and Rambo asks me to go with them to escort Lilly. Lilly looks unhappy and I quickly suspect Rambo must be the boyfriend she told me about. I tell them to go on since I plan to go to the junction where Elisa sells her sugarcane. Rambo comes back and finds me talking in Dholo Luo with Elisa. He speaks to me in Swahili sheng’ (slang) and English. I ask him: “Where have you been? Were you lost in Nyanza Province?”. He tells me: “I left Nyanza ages ago. I am now doing BA Psychology in Nairobi”. I know that he is lying because there is nothing like BA psychology at the University of Nairobi: psychology is only done at master’s level. I ask him: “Where do they hold their classes?” and he answers: “Just there in town. I will graduate next year”. I wonder which degree course you can do in less than two years—even if it is in the parallel program, module 2 can take at least three years. He continues: “My sister works with an NGO in Sudan and she pays my fee. We have been living in Jacaranda (a very posh estate in Nairobi). I drive to college in my sister’s car. My sister is petite (small) like you and she is not married and does not want to get married”. He now asks Elisa in Dholo Luo: “Isn’t it, you know my sister?” but Elisa seems to be very uninterested in his stories. [...]

It is past six o’clock now and I decide to leave them, but Rambo asks me to come into his room briefly. Rambo stays in the simba of his brother who had passed away. Rambo gives me some notes on psychology to read that he had made at the library nearby. He sits so close to me, yet the chair is so big. Soon after, it starts raining heavily and I have to wait to go home. He shows me his photo album and shows me one picture of a girl from Nyanza College who used to be his girlfriend. She is a Luhyia. He tells me: “We broke up because she was cheating on me. My sister did also not like her. My sister is overprotective of me and never likes me getting close to girls. There is a girl in Nairobi whom I have become close to but my sister had found out about her and she followed us one day”. I do not like the way he sits so close to me. I tell him that I want to go home as I was expecting a phone call from my boyfriend. He tells me: “Never tell a man that you want to go home. You do not know what I had in mind”. I ask him: “Is Lilly your girlfriend?”. He denies it, and says: “We are just close friends and Lilly really confides in me and tells me about her problems. Lilly is undergoing so much stress at home. Recently her uncle tried to rape her but she managed to lock herself in one of the rooms. Because Lilly tells me to take care, I believe she is in love with me. She has also told me that since I left for Nairobi, people have been spreading rumours that we are going out, yet I have not heard those rumours. Lilly has already met with my sister and she often comes to my home to visit my mother, even when I am absent. Lilly is a nice girl, still naive. I do not want to bring up the issue of dating as maybe she does not want us to be lovers”. I know that he is lying to me. I have a strong feeling that they are lovers since Lilly had told me that her boyfriend is in Nairobi and that he is taken care of by his sister and that her uncle knows him. Rambo further tells me: “I am a close friend to Lilly’s uncle, such that at times he asks me if he can spend the night with his girlfriend in my room. I refuse because Lilly would not be happy to find her married uncle with his girlfriend in my room. Lilly is aware about her uncle’s affairs”. He then asks me: “What do you think of
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me?”. I know that he wants to go back to the topic of asking me to be his lover. I tell him: “I know you as Rambo, Onyango’s friend”. He tells me: “After meeting you at the disco with Onyango, I wanted to talk to you and to get to know you better”. I tell him: “This is not possible because I am already seeing someone”. He keeps on insisting: “You should also give me a chance and consider me”. He is really irritating me because I have already told him that I am in a serious relationship, yet he is insisting I should consider him. He tells me: “I have not been having girlfriends apart from the Luhyia lady from college. Many girls have shown interest in me and visit me at home. One girl from Dhonam Secondary School is actually telling everyone that I am her boyfriend, yet I am not.” [...] He finally escorts me home. It has rained heavily outside. I get back home past 9 pm. He tells me: “I am disappointed that you have refused to give me a chance. I hate failing. I want an educated woman who can reason intellectually”. I wish him a good night and go into my house. I am annoyed with Rambo and I hope he is not going to hurt Lilly. Lilly really loves him and has many problems at home (she is an orphan, lives with her aunt and uncle and is one of the participants at Yeshica) (December 2005).

Rambo tried to impress Petronella with his stories and therefore needed to lie to Petronella at various moments. He did not realise that Petronella could easily uncover his lies since she was familiar with university and town life: most young women from Winam were not always able to judge if a man’s stories were true since they were used to village life. The fact that Rambo was an attractive, young teacher who claimed to be studying for a university degree and to have a rich sister in Nairobi who lent him her car was enough to convince most girls and young women that he would be a good catch. When Petronella made him realise that she suspected that he was trying to seduce her while he was actually dating Lilly, Rambo was not amused. He tried all means to ‘save face’ by demonstrating his innocence and by refuting the rumours that she might have heard about him. He denied being Lilly’s boyfriend and cast Lilly’s uncle in a negative light in order to try to convince Petronella that he doesn’t approve of “double dealing”. Yet, he did exactly that, over and over again.

In “sweet-talking” young women, young men tried to say exactly what women wanted to hear. If a man was financially capable, a woman might be more easily convinced of his ‘virtue’, but the majority of the male youngsters of Winam had few financial means. According to some of the male youngsters, the first thing young women consider in response to a proposed relationship is money: they reasoned that a man should approach her by showing off his wealth. To do so, men talked about their possessions or bragged about their educational level or job. In this way, they promised and pretended to be a responsible future husband. They also tried to present themselves with a fashionable dressing style: in formal suits (white shirt, black trousers, and polished shoes), or in the urban dress code of American rappers (baggy pants, big shoes, heavy necklaces, and sunglasses) commonly seen in movies, TV, and magazines. In
addition, many also tried to initiate a kind of ‘love story’ in which they praised the young woman (see also ‘What has love got to do with it’, later in this chapter). They believed that young women liked to hear how their appearance emotionally touched a man, and used lines like: “You are the most beautiful girl in the world”, “I love you so much”, or “I cannot wait to have you in my arms”. Thus rural young men tried to conform to the image of being a ‘responsible lover’ or ‘ideal boyfriend’, and often employed a kind of ‘provider-discourse’ that emphasised their financial means.

In Tadele’s (2005: 38–39) study in Dessie, a provincial town in Ethiopia, he writes that his informants perceived “women as objects that can be fooled around with” since a man may not necessarily be required to prove his financial status. Sometimes the young men from Winam made promises to young women that they couldn’t fulfil, and ‘got away with it’ by using delaying tactics. Axel (18-year-old attendant at the secondary school) called young women the “weaker sex” since they were in a dependent position and easy to convince: “If you promise them something and they fail to get it, they will still be together with you”. Axel continued:

You know, a boy can even tell a girl: “You know, I love you”, or maybe “I will marry you, I will cater to you, I will take care of everything. After your school, just work hard, I have this and this, I have something to give you, please let’s meet on this date, so that I give you this particular thing”. Sometimes, let’s say, he might promise to give [her] 100—not 100, even 5,000 shillings, somebody can tell a lady that. So the lady is going to be happy. That appointment, the lady will not miss, that is the place or that is where they will meet. You know, when they meet, the lady can sometimes ask the boy: “Where is the money or where is the promise?”. The boy may tell her: “No, I had a problem, I had some problem somewhere else so you know, you have to excuse me for the time being, but your matter or your case I know. I am solving the case, so just persevere, yeah, just chill for the time being, I know your case”. You know, like the ladies, so many ladies are easily convinced. They will just be very happy, waiting for another day. Again that other day—she may end up not seeing him the second time, yeah. By that time, the boy shall have gone somewhere else again: he is having another girlfriend somewhere else (in-depth interview, May 2006).

“Sweet-talking” was used to convince young women that there was no cheating or double-dealing going on. The young man often needed to convince a friend to make up a story for him before his girlfriend found out: young women would sometimes employ this same subterfuge. In the following anecdote, Onyango described how he tried to solve a situation that happened in his friend Ken’s simba, where two of Ken’s girlfriends came to visit him at the same time. The young women were very suspicious and Ken needed to “sweet-talk” them later in order to win them back. Onyango wrote in his diary:

At around 8:30 am, Ken came to our home to call me because his girlfriend NyarSakwa paid him a visit and wanted to greet me before she left. Ken told me that she had arrived yesterday evening. When we had reached Ken’s simba, NyarSakwa had already swept
Ken’s room and collected the rubbish inside the room. I asked her why she had left the rubbish inside and she said that she was afraid of the neighbours. NyarSakwa asked me to tell her about the quarrel between my stepbrother Joel and Ken. [...] As I was explaining that story to NyarSakwa, Safi, another girlfriend of Ken’s, appeared. Ken started worrying because Safi and NyarSakwa were going to know that they were sharing a boy. I signalled Ken and called him outside. I told him that I was going to cheat NyarSakwa to escort me to the market, then he [could] escape with Safi to my room. I told NyarSakwa to escort me to the market but she refused. It seemed like she had realized the secret. I again called Ken outside. I gave Ken my key and told him to escape to my room. After he had gone to my room, I called Safi outside and cheated (i.e., lie to) her that NyarSakwa is my girlfriend so she had no reason to think deep. I told her that NyarSakwa had paid me a visit and I had exchanged my room with Ken. I convinced her and escorted her to my room where Ken was. When I came back, NyarSakwa asked me where Safi had gone. I cheated (i.e., lied to) her and said that Safi is my girlfriend and someone told her that I was with Ken and that is why she had come to this room. She asked me again where Ken was and I told her that he had gone to look for a bicycle to escort her. After that NyarSakwa asked that we go and rest in my house. In my opinion, it was as if she had realized something. I cheated (i.e., lied to) her that I had forgotten my key at our home. She told me that I was cheating (i.e., lied to) her that I knew what was going on. I convinced her and escorted her up to the main road (26 November 2005).

Young women were often left with the impression that men were trying to fool them. Yet, Achien’g (a 15- or 16-year-old young woman who was staying with her maternal grandmother) confided that if a young woman really likes a man, it is hard to be sceptical of his “sweet-talking” because she loves him. Most of the female youngsters I worked with often generalized that “Kenyan men are all womanizers”, who only view women as sexual objects: “the men only want sex” and therefore have different girlfriends. They complained that men in general could not be trusted and that their “sweet words” were just to seduce them into sex instead of indicating that the men would really take care of them. They felt betrayed by the man’s ‘provider’ and ‘love’ discourse. Young women also “sweet-talked” men but to a lesser extent. They might use phrases such as “I like you so much” or “You are the only one for me” to get pity from their boyfriends or to play the victim in order to get some financial help. If a boyfriend suspected a young woman of cheating on him, she could “sweet-talk” him by telling him that he was her only lover.

Young men, on the other hand, usually complained that most of the young women were motivated to start or stay in a sexual relationship not for love but for money and sexual intercourse, and, as I explain later, they also felt cheated.

4.3 Delaying marriage

Utilizing the language of love, affection, and pleasure, youngsters tried to seduce their lovers. However, at the time of my research, few sexual relationships turned into long-lasting relationships or (informal) marriages. Just as with young people in most places, most sexual relationships among young people in Winam were casual, lasting a couple of
months or less (including “hit and runs” or one-night stands), and only few were more enduring. Both young men and young women imagined that they would become more “serious” with age, and that the sexual freedom (such as dating members of their own clan) they experienced during childhood and adolescence would diminish over the course of their lifecycle, certainly with the transformation of boyfriends into husbands and girlfriends into wives.

In Winam, few marriages were legally recognized or protected by law. Usually couples just decided to ‘stay together’, sometimes after the young woman was found to be pregnant. In such situations, there was no formal commitment binding the couple. Although such relationships are usually referred to as ‘informal marriages’ or ‘cohabitation’ in social scientific literature, JoWinam said “osetedo” (she or he has married) about people who have come together in this way. The truth behind cohabitation was that most young men could not afford to pay bride wealth to the young woman’s family, lacking the necessary resources for formalizing a marriage or taking care of a family. Most of them tried to satisfy themselves with the rationalization that cohabitation is a precursor to marriage, saying they hoped to “legalize their marriage soon”. Most informal marriages among young people, however, did not last long (at the time of my research and among the youngsters I worked with, they ranged from a few months up to five years). At any time, one of the partners might decide to leave the other. As Paul, a 20-year-old secondary school graduate, explained: “To marry is easy: you just marry by staying in that place. So you can easily divorce. You can just go away and marry somebody else. I can even stay with a girl without my parents finding out”. I also often heard stories such as: “She was first married in Siaya, left her husband, and then married a fisherman”, or “He already married twice before he settled with that girlfriend”. Robert, a 25-year-old, said about his second wife, whom he had married after his first wife had left him: “This one will just run away soon [too]”.

Parents more easily gave consent to a proposal from a wealthier person, since marriage was to some extent still perceived as a socioeconomic contract between two families. For a long time, this contract was only valid if the young woman was still a virgin. Because marrying a virgin was no longer (or perhaps never has been) realistic, the economic value of a young woman was no longer dependent on her virginity. Many parents living in poverty, however, still saw the marriage of their daughter to a ‘rich man’ as an opportunity to generate income. This was certainly the case with MinAkinyi, who thought it better to intervene when her daughter Akinyi started to have interest in
the opposite sex. She was eager to get a son-in-law with financial means in case she died soon, and her daughter assumes responsibility for taking care of her siblings.\textsuperscript{10}

Economics also played a role in terms of inequality within marriages. Young men emphasized the importance of maintaining their dominance during marriage, since most of them believed that to avoid quarrels in a relationship a man should always be on a higher level (i.e., higher level of education and better-paying job) than a woman. They imagined that if a woman became independent she would start to disrespect a man. The young women with whom I worked shared these sentiments, preferring a boyfriend who was more highly educated than themselves so they could look up to him. Most, however, also believed that during adolescence it was still possible to have relationships where men did not dominate, as long as those relationships did not lead to marriage. Ochien’g (a 22-year-old fisherman, married to MinMercy) offered the famous Portuguese football player Ronaldo as an example:

You know that Ronaldo marries girls who are very educated—that is why you hear that Ronaldo marries year after year. It seems like he wants to be proud and that girl also wants to be proud, so that makes them not be able to do what? They cannot live well [together]. [...] It should be that one person is up [higher] and another is down [lower]. That is when it is good, but if you are both up, true, if you are both up—then there is no understanding in that house (focus group discussion, June 2006).

Most of the male youngsters often delayed (informal) marriage because they did not feel ready yet and had not secured their own financial means to sustain themselves. At the same time, the expansion of the labour market had enabled young women to become less economically dependent on potential husbands. In Winam, young women expressed a desire for their own steady source of income in case their husband stopped providing for them. Alice (a 22-year-old secondary school graduate), who was dating Moses, one of the musicians from a famous local band, did not want to hurry into marriage. She also understood that the impact of HIV/AIDS put an additional burden on household members, and was another reason why youngsters delayed marriage. When Petronella asked Alice if she planned on marrying her boyfriend, Alice replied:

Not now since we are still not ready for marriage and he also told me that he couldn’t marry me now. I am also not ready because I have no job and a steady source of income. I do not want to fully rely on the man. I feel that times may come when the man does not want to give you money and may change his colours and stop providing for you and maybe mistreat you. I think it is important to be able to stand on your own two feet just in case something like that happens. Moses is not ready to marry now because he will not be in a position to start supporting his family. He gets very little from the band and since he is the eldest boy in his family, he has to take care of all those at home. His father died and left two women who I think are all [HIV-] positive and his stepmother is very sick now compared to his mother. The rest of his siblings are still in school (informal conversation, January 2006).
Although young women might have their own income-generating activity, the discourse that men were supposed to be the head of the household remained hegemonic at the time of my research. Women expected men to provide them with basic needs (food, rent, or school fees), and any money women earned would be used for buying their own luxury items. Young women in this way reaffirmed the social gender role of men as breadwinners, even when they might be earning more than their boyfriends or husbands. In any event, both young men and young women in contemporary Winam earn very little, and, as a consequence, marriage—formal or informal—is no longer a stable form of union in Winam.

To summarize, both men and women used creative ways, which did not always conform to gender stereotypes, to win over their sexual partner. Sex, love, and money all came into play in shaping why one lover was preferred over another, and, in some cases, young women dated several boyfriends so that all three of these areas were covered. The young men whom I followed up were well aware of this, and tried to win over young women by “sweet-talking” them and presenting themselves in a better light than they actually were. Both female and male youngsters complained that sex and money took precedence over love. Informal marriage has come to dominate the social landscape, as men can no longer meet their roles as breadwinners nor offer bride wealth, and young women and their mothers often angle to create relationships with young men who seem to have financial means. Within this context, some young women sought to earn their own income, not just for luxury items, but to provide some measure of economic independence.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, young women’s use of sex to obtain money has already been widely described in the literature on ‘transactional sex’ in sub-Saharan Africa. I hope to broaden the simplistic public health understanding of ‘transactional sex’ by illustrating how youth are adapting to a changing socioeconomic context and taking into account their intergenerational relations. In the next section, I examine the meaning of money in young people’s sexual relationships, describe the practices of money/gift transfers, and analyse the situations in which they occur.

5. The ‘money/gift–sex exchange’ debate

The exchange of money or gifts between sexual partners need not be related to coercive or exploitative relations. As Cole (2009) demonstrated in her research on young women’s
narratives of sexual relationships in Madagascar, money often served as both a motivation to seek love and an expression of it. Other research shows that money often forms an integral part of courtship and can be an expression of care and affection within relationships (Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Hunter 2002; Leclerc-Madlala 2004; Poulin 2007). As long as the giving of money or gifts from men, and the giving of domestic services from girls or young women, remains within certain limits, such actions can demonstrate appreciation and respect. This was also the case in Winam. However, when limits were not respected, for example, if a young woman became ‘too demanding’ or a young man made promises he never fulfilled, the issue of money became problematic in young people’s sexual relationships.

5.1. Demonstrating appreciation and respect

In Winam, a young woman was aware that when she accepted money or gifts from a young man, this almost automatically implied that she had accepted him as her boyfriend. It was quite common and almost expected that a young man would provide some financial support for his girlfriend(s) (regardless of whether or not she became a wife) for a number of years prior to marriage (see also Simpson 2009: 61–66). In this way, during a sexual relationship, young men demonstrate their ability to meet the financial needs of their partners. Giving gifts or money was perceived as something ‘normal’ and part of young people’s everyday life, and a way to show girlfriends that they were cared about.

Most young women expected to receive occasional financial support from their boyfriends. This was given in the form of material goods, such as soap, body lotion, a soft drink or biscuits, a dress or underwear, schoolbooks, or a small amount of money (for example, 50 or 100 Kenyan shillings, about 60 eurocents or 1.25 euro). Sometimes girl- and boyfriends exchanged “snaps” (pictures) of each other in different styles of dress or taken at different places, or young men invited girlfriends to go and take a picture together. In addition, at an early stage of their relationship they sometimes surprised their girlfriends with sentimental cards expressing their love. Most of the young women tended to prefer money to gifts, because they could then buy what they lack or what they like.

Most of the young women and young men with whom I worked did not directly link the gifts or money with sex, but rather considered it as a sign of love and appreciation, as Josh (19 years old and boda boda (bicycle taxi) operator) explained: “I can buy her many clothes to show her that I love her. [...] I just surprise her with them.
That is when a girl will know that you love her. If you cannot provide her with such things, if from the time you started the relationship, you have only been taking her for tea in hotels and sodas, is all you have to count, that is not enough. It means you are fake material” (informal conversation, June 2006). Handing over money or a gift was not directly followed by sex: it could come any time before or after it. When a young man gave his girlfriend pocket money, he would usually say something like, “Take this for your bus fare”, or “Take this for your lunch”. When a young woman needed to take a matatu (local bus) or boda-boda (bicycle taxi) to reach her boyfriend’s place and to return home, she typically assumed her boyfriend would cover the travel costs. Sometimes a young woman would also ask her boyfriend to assist her with “something small”: she might, for example, ask her boyfriend to help her to settle a debt of 150 Kenyan shillings (approximately 2 euro) in a local shop, or tell him that she lacks a bra, a pair of shoes, or a pair of socks. If the young man had money at that particular moment, he would try to share it with his girlfriend. He might not give her the total amount she requested, but at least a part of it. The young men knew that it was often due to poverty that the young women would ask for assistance, and that the money might not go where first described, as Axel (an 18-year-old schoolboy) explained: “Sometimes she does not use this money to buy the socks. She maybe uses it to eat some things, yeah. So it is, [because of] poverty, generally, it is poverty”. It was often too shameful for young women to admit that they were running out of food at home. Young men, on the other hand, felt proud that they could show their girlfriends that they were capable of taking care of them, at least to some degree.

In most of the public health literature on transactional sex, ‘providing’ is usually observed and described in a one-way direction, where the young man is the one who gives. The young women I worked with, however, also often tried to express their ‘love’ to their boyfriends, not only by “playing sex” together, but also by offering their help in domestic duties. Whenever the young man was in need, his girlfriend would try to assist him with the laundry, iron his clothes, sweep his room, and cook his food. Just as the young men found it obvious that they should provide for their girlfriends, the young women also understood that they should relieve their boyfriends from domestic tasks if the men were living on their own. The women’s gifts usually took the form of services and small presents rather than money. This reflects the gender inequality of the cash economy: young women were economically dependent on young men and young men had greater access to cash. Nevertheless, there were rare cases when a young woman provided money to her boyfriend because she was working when he was not. JoWinam
would gossip about such situations, regarding it with ambiguous feelings, as it was not the way things should happen.

In sum, apart from demonstrating appreciation and respect, money was an important form of financial assistance that young men were expected to provide to their girlfriends. When a man was not able to meet a young woman’s basic needs, her parents and other relatives might support—or even encourage—her in breaking off the relationship. Young men therefore made a distinction between covering a woman’s basic needs versus luxury needs. They believed it their duty, as a man to assist a girlfriend when she had basic needs such as food, soap, body lotion, basic clothing, rent, school fees, transportation, or medical costs. When women asked for expensive, luxury, and fashionable items such as mobile phones, an upscale dress, or a watch, most young men preferred to break off the relationship, in large part because such demands could not be fulfilled. Young women, on the other hand, did not see the need to stay with someone who could not meet ‘their luxury needs’. Thus, while there was economic inequality between the sexes, there was a different kind of inequality in relationships: Young women could navigate between and maximize multiple ‘resources’ (men) whereas young men, lacking financial stability, faced difficulties in securing a sexual relationship.

5.2. Negotiating the terms and boundaries of exchange

At the places where young men congregated, such as the market, the boda boda (bicycle taxi) stop, the karata (cards)-playing place, the draft (checkers)-playing place, and the video halls, they often discussed women and their powers. They talked about “girl X”, who was “overpowering” her boyfriend, “girl Y” who was “only after money”, or “girl Z” who was not behaving the way she should. The young men—and young women—with whom I worked disliked young women who were “too demanding”, dismissing them as “girls who like money”. Many young men mentioned that they did not want “their love [to be] based on money”, and they disliked being judged on the basis of their available cash flow. Many believed as Onyango did, that “most girls are after money and therefore do not choose their boyfriend wisely”. They believed that such women leave their boyfriends if they can’t fulfil their needs. As Ochien’g said: “She only loves you when money is there but once you are broke, she runs away, which means that she is not a true lover”.

When a young man was very much in love with a young woman and he really feared losing her, he would try to provide the young woman with all that she demanded from him. Even if the gifts were very expensive, he would try to fulfill her desires. This
was also a way for a young man to keep a young woman for himself, and to try to control her movements, as he was conscious that if he did not invest in her, she might search for another or additional boyfriend, or be taken away from him by another, more financially capable man. Some young men went so far as to beg their male peers to lend them money or to steal from their parents. (Borrowing money from female friends was considered too shameful.) Other young men tried to find additional work, as Axel explained:

> These boys could maybe go as far as stealing things from the parents. Maybe some could beg, they could beg and beg and beg, and if you refuse, they steal—but some could go and work hard somewhere, maybe like weeding for some people. After weeding, you maybe get forty or fifty shillings. This one is going to be divided among the girlfriends. You know, some people could even have four or three girlfriends and some could just have one. So if you are the only one, you are lucky, you can even get that fifty, because the girl is going to demand it if she sees you have it: “Just give me that thirty tomorrow, I will come” (in-depth interview, May 2006).

According to Onyango, if a couple’s love was not mutual and the woman started to realize that her boyfriend really loved her, she might take advantage of him and exaggerate her need for fashionable goods. However, there was a limit to this and young women knew that if they started to be ‘too demanding’, the relationship might end. But when love was not mutual, she might still press the limits since she had nothing to lose. On the other hand, if the young man did not love his girlfriend and if she demanded a lot of money or presents from him, then the young man might quickly walk out of the relationship because he had nothing to lose.

Among fellow youngsters, young women did not hesitate to show off the goods or money they had received from their ‘rich’ boyfriend. Young men, on the other hand, would seldom brag to their male friends about providing money to girlfriends because their friends might criticize them and accuse them of using money to buy love and affection. Still, fellow youngsters noticed if a male friend was in the possession of money and this gave him some honour and status. There was no doubt that the young men loved to be able to behave and spend like middle-class people from town, as if they had a stable job and no difficulty in providing for their girlfriends. Yet, most village men were realistic: they simply could not afford certain gifts or big outings with young women.

Conquering or impressing any of the “dot.com girls”, for instance, was no longer something any of the rural young men tried to do. The dot.com girls were a group of female youngsters who had spent most of their childhood and adolescence in town, were extremely mobile, and who were perceived to be ‘modern’ (see Chapter 4). According to
most of the young men of Winam, as girlfriends they were “too demanding” since their desires exceeded what were considered basic goods.

The so-called townsmen were usually able to attract the dot.coms. A number of rural men in Winam felt annoyed because they could hardly compete with their male rivals from town who had more to offer to the rural young women and the dot.com girls. The fact that their male rivals lived in town was already enough to attract rural women. Apart from the townsmen, the fishermen, teachers, bus drivers, construction workers, and CDC employees who were living in Winam or who came to Winam for a short period of time were attractive to most of the young women of Winam. Tadele (2005), who did research among young men in a provincial town in Ethiopia, reported that the men in his study who were living in the streets of Dessie felt frustrated because for a number of women “taking a boyfriend or husband is one strategy for survival” (Tadele 2005: 49; see also Schoepf 1992). While it is for some women a survival strategy, for many others, a lover’s wealthy background may act as “an extra spice in a relationship” (Tadele 2005: 49), giving women an opportunity to climb up the social ladder, even though it was only temporarily.

Most of the young men could only occasionally afford to give their girlfriends a little present or a small amount of pocket money, and thus could easily be left for a townsmen. When young men realised that their girlfriends did not take their efforts into account, especially when they ran off with a man more likely to secure their livelihood, the young men became very bitter. Augus complained:

> How many girls have disappointed men, they cheat (i.e., lie to) you that they love you, you pay their [school] fee, then when the graduation day comes, she tells you not to attend her graduation, why is that? It is because she has someone there, she comes back home with a baby accompanied by another man. That can really hurt (informal conversation, December 2006).

Many young women know that both men and women are enduring the same economic hardship. Young women who were really emotionally attached to their boyfriends were also empathetic towards their boyfriends: although boyfriends were at times not able to provide, they continued to stay with them. Unlike the young women who were just after money or the dot.coms, they would not leave a boyfriend if he was in a difficult situation. Some young women might also have no option other than to stay with a boyfriend: as an orphan, or without family members to support them, such women would have no one if they left their boyfriend or husband.
The exchange of money, gifts, and domestic work continues to play an important role in contemporary sexual relationships in Winam. My data confirms and expands upon what other anthropologists already have emphasised, namely the significance of love in the context of commoditised social relations. The exchange of money and gifts in sexual relationships is viewed as an expression of appreciation and respect. However, if the exchange of money/gifts exceeded certain limits, the man’s economic position or his livelihood was threatened. In this precarious economic context, young women navigated between multiple men, seeing them as resources. They also often misused or exploited their so-called subordinate role and demanded from young men more than they actually could afford. In this way, a number of male youngsters actually became victims of their expected ‘provider’ role in society. Emotional fulfilment in a relationship was not only a preoccupation of young women but also that of young men.

6. ‘What’s ‘love’ got to do with it?’

Relationships based on money and gifts are often viewed in contrast to those based on ‘love’. As explained above, intimacy and exchange are not inherently opposed but can go hand in hand in a continuous process of negotiating the terms of a relationship. In this section, I explain the role of emotional attachment in the intimate relationships of young people of Winam and what it means to them to have a ‘modern’ relationship.

6.1. Emotional attachment and modernity

Whereas young men often used ‘love’ as an euphemism for sex, most of the young women I worked with stressed that an emotional attachment towards each other was as important as or even more so than having sex. Akinyi, for example, broke off her cohabitation with the man from Mombasa, disappointing her mother, because there was no love involved in that relationship. Not only did she not have romantic feelings for him, but also he disrespected her family and had multiple girlfriends simultaneously:

[Being in Mombasa] was bad because that man would talk badly about my family and about me. I never had any feelings for him and I found it hard to stay with someone I do not love. When two people are living together without love, it normally leads to a lot of quarrels and fights, and when the children see what is happening at home, they will not respect others and will end up having the same fights and problems in their own homes. [...] Someone might want you, yet you do not love him. Love is more important than money and I love Okoth more (Informal conversation, August 2005).

Young women often judged the quality of their relationships according to ideals of emotional intimacy (see also Spronk’s 2006 research on middle-class youngsters in
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Nairobi and Van Eerdewijk’s 2006 research in Dakar). Young men did not so easily show their emotional side to a woman since they thought that this was what was expected of them. Yet, even though love was more important for Akinyi than it was for Okoth, who mainly was searching for sexual satisfaction without any exclusive commitment, this did not mean that Okoth was not emotionally attached to her. Akinyi expressed that she would have preferred to have a more attentive lover who would show his love by taking her out, not only by having sex. To Akinyi’s irritation, Okoth did not want her to join him when he went to a disco matanga; she later discovered that he was seeing different girlfriends simultaneously. Similarly, Akinyi had a relationship with Jack, her boyfriend from Mombasa, while she still was with Okoth.

The larger story about love and the youngsters of Winam was also about modernity. Not only economic and demographic shifts (see Illouz 1997) but also the globalization of images and “proto-narratives of possible lives” (Appadurai 1996) played a crucial role in shaping young people’s desires for ‘romantic love’ that were linked to ideologies of ‘modern progress’. In this way, the youngsters positioned themselves in contrast to their parents and grandparents, for whom relationships had been a contract between two lineages. However, we need to be sceptical about claims that assume that the measure of human progress can be marked by a society’s shift from ‘traditional’ to a ‘modern’ relationship, in which a companionate relationship or marriage is perceived as being ‘modern’. This would be a very Eurocentric way of analysing this phenomenon (Larkin 1997; Lindholm 2006; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006; Thomas and Cole 2009). As Hirsch and Wardlow (2006) argued in their book Modern Loves and Cole and Thomas (2009) did in Love in Africa, companionate or romantic courtship practices are not a consequence of economic development (i.e., ‘progress’) and should consequently not be viewed as being superior to other forms of intimate relations. The idea of romantic love is not new in Africa, even though in the social scientific and Christian accounts from the 1930s, love was a neglected topic (Thomas 2009). Previous generations of African youngsters have also experienced passionate love in their relationships.

While romantic love is not new, companionate marriage is a relatively recent global ideal that “implies a constellation of associated ideals and practices, such as marriage based on a prior romantic relationship, individual choice in spouse, monogamy, nuclear family households, [...] [and] viewing marital sex as an expression and symbol of emotional attachment” (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006: 5). The mass media have further facilitated the spread of a companionate courtship ideal, and HIV/AIDS campaigns have in recent years started addressing subjects as love, trust, passion, and attraction (Spronk
In Dhonam, and in other places all over the world, young men and women often use ‘love’ as a trope through which they hope to claim a ‘modern’ identity (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006: 13–14).

In Winam, when young men and young women spoke about romantic relationships, rather than feelings of affection, they typically discussed sexual satisfaction. ‘Romantic relationships’ in Winam were mainly understood as unions where both partners enjoyed and expected sexual pleasure and satisfaction from each other. Thus an important measure of the quality of such a relationship was not only that the young woman satisfies her boyfriend but also that the young man understands that women as well need to enjoy sexual pleasure. A ‘modern man’ thus should know how to please his girlfriend sexually. Youngsters differentiated, as well, between the town and the village, positioning people from town as being ‘more modern’ than they are in the village. In town, emotional feelings and attraction came to the foreground when someone claimed to be ‘modern’: emotional attachment, urbanity, and modernity were thus closely linked.

6.2. Ideals of romantic love

Both female and male youngsters stressed that an emotional attachment to each other was as important as having sex or receiving money, and therefore avoided arranged relationships. Most of them were familiar with romantic ideals from ‘Nollywood’ (Nigerian) and ‘Bollywood’ (Hindi) movies, and the popular American soap series ‘The Bold and the Beautiful’ shown at the village’s video place. Romantic love relationships were believed to promise greater intimacy and communication between partners and such relationships were thought to be based on equality (see also Verheijen 2006; Thomas and Cole 2009).

Adhis, who longed for a romantic relationship, described how her former boyfriend Felix had been an ideal boyfriend: showing love and care, spending time with her, assisting in solving problems, and being well educated. Adhis was not only emotionally attached to Felix, but, and perhaps more importantly, she could also rely on him whenever she was in need because of his status as a good student and an employed young man. He was a presentable lover, someone who was hard working and who tried to achieve his goals in life. They never engaged in sex, and she broke off the relationship the moment he said he wanted to be sexually active. Looking at her story in more detail, we can see how notions of love shaped her understanding of her relationship with Felix.
Adhis came from a family of eight children. Her father was a primary school teacher and her mother took care of the children. Adhis had spent most of her childhood in town, where she stayed with her older brother at their aunt’s place. When she finished secondary school in 2005, she returned to her parents’ home in the village. Adhis’s only wish was to get out of Winam and to continue with college as soon as possible: she had a strained relationship with her mother, and had enjoyed living in town. When we asked her in an in-depth interview what kind of a person she wanted to marry, she told us what her ideal boyfriend would be like:

The kind of person I have always wanted maybe is loving or kind. Someone who understands people, someone who will accept me the way I am with my weaknesses and everything, so that is the understanding. But I always look at four things in a person: first of all, I look at your character, then I look at your integrity; your character also is in your morality, then I look at if you are God fearing. Character, integrity, moral, and God fearing (in-depth interview, May 2006).

Then she shared with us her story of Felix, her second boyfriend (it is not clear if they ever had sex together), whom she got to know when she was in secondary school. Adhis had difficulty paying her tuition, and she was often sent home to get her school fees: often there was no money, and she was unable to return to school. On her way home one time, she met Felix, who had just finished his Form 4 (i.e., last grade in secondary school) exams and was walking home. They started to meet regularly, and Felix would send her flowers, love letters, and cards, and even giving her money to get transportation home. They went to church together, and would meet sometimes at the Winam library, where he would coach her on mathematics. She said: “He was really loving and caring about my education—he could send me these past papers, coach me on maths, as he was a mathematician too”.

After secondary school, Felix went to stay with his brother in Nairobi where he went to a college to study insurance, and he still sent Adhis money now and then. When he asked her to have sex, she broke things off with him:

During the course of our friendship, there was a time he told me: “I now want us to be engaged”. Then I asked him: “Are we not engaged?”, and he said: “Anyway, don’t be a fool, I want us to be engaged sexually”, so he insisted. So he used to bring me [advice columns from] newspapers [in which they discussed love relationships], these letters to Donna and Madonna [to try to convince me]... He also sent me many greetings. He used to bring me so many things... So I have so many things of his, even CDs (condoms), I still have them to date. Up to now, he is still calling my brother. I think I burnt his love letters after we broke up. His letters were so painful, all these letters. If I think about the reason why we broke up... After that, I hated him: he was pressuring me so much, so I stopped talking to him. After pressuring me to enter into premarital sex, I thought that: “Is he really caring about me? Is he really loving?”. I was so mad, how could he! Whenever he used to come to my place, I could hide. I don’t know, maybe something is always wrong with me. I just
live like that. Yet, I never knew whether he wanted protected sex or not. We never talked about it. That is the mistake I made. I never asked him about it. So I was remorseful about that, I held it for so long, until recently—maybe I could have just discussed it (in-depth interview, May 2006).

She admitted to still having feelings for Felix:

We had great feelings; we could even marry each other. We used to talk about marriage so much, but also something discouraged me: Felix comes from ‘K’ (the name of a clan) and I also come from ‘K’. We cannot marry [because of this], so it is so painful for me. Till today I cry because I fear how much I have mistreated him, up to now I still miss him because he was waiting for me, crying over me. So many times, he still tries to reach me through my younger brother. He tells me that his life is not going to be like he had hoped, that he is going to lose his life because of me, he is not going to have the good future he thought of. But he doesn’t know that we come from the same clan. And you know, he was the only guy who understood me, the way I am, everything, he understood me, he knew me. As for me, I also thought that maybe me and him, we could have a better life together. So when I left, that strong bond broke up. I also thought that, Felix told me that if I leave him, everyone that I will date, those relationships will never succeed. So maybe it is true— I don't know, maybe I am the person who believes that. I also pray that maybe we can still marry. I have seen people who marry, even in the Bible: I read that someone married a very close relative. Something always misleads me that I still have him but if I think of my parents, what they would talk about or what people would say, maybe I am being put off, but in my mind, I still believe that it is possible. I have always tried to forget about him, but just recently, I was just going to call him (in-depth interview, May 2006).

While having sex would be a way to affirm their love, Adhis was afraid to engage in sex before marriage. Being a faithful Anglican, she was afraid of the feelings of guilt that would haunt her for the rest of her life, having committed a sin. She was also frightened of the beatings she would receive from her uncle or mother if she was seen with a boyfriend. (She was once terribly beaten by her uncle with a metal stick when he saw her greeting her first boyfriend, when she was still attending primary school). Although they were clan related, Adhis regretted that their relationship had ended, and that she had not talked with Felix about protected sex, because she was not sure if she would ever fall in love with someone else. In addition to having a loving relationship, Adhis might have been economically better off in a relationship with Felix than without him, as he could have been a responsible husband since he was working at a commercial bank in the city. Adhis remained at home, with no real future prospects, only false promises from her parents that one day they might pay her college fees.

Love was also an ideal for, a 17-year-old young woman, who believed that ‘love is blind’. She reasoned that once you fall in love with someone, it does not matter if he is broke, or ugly, or a drunkard.

Atieno: So, you know, love is blind, so you can just love him the way he is. I mean, even if he is broke. If you have deep feelings for someone, you individually choose this one, or that girl, because you love her, extremely. It is like that. It
depends on the way that your heart is and the way he treats you. That happens for both boys and girls.

Ellen: Okay, you say love is based on strong feelings, but could you love, a very, very ugly person?

Atieno: Yes, you can love a very ugly person, yes, as long as you have feelings for him. You see love is blind, it doesn't matter that this person is ugly, or he is good looking, the way he is, even if he looks like an ape. I mean you just love him because you know very well what he means to you.

Ellen: Yeah, but you also said that a bad boy is one who drinks too much, so if that boy you love a lot is drinking and behaving disrespectfully, you would still love him?

Atieno: I will tell him: “Boy, look”. I will sit down with him when he is sober. I tell him: “What you are doing is not good, so you have to change your behaviour,” and then, even I will, as long as I really love him so much, I will try to pray for him so that he becomes nice and stops that bad behaviour of his. It is a must, that even if he also loves me, he will listen to me (in-depth interview, April 2006).

‘Love is blind’ applies to the relationship Atieno had with Sylvester, whom she finally married, despite her mother's and other relatives' warnings. Since Atieno had completed the first year of secondary school, her relatives believed she deserved a better-educated boyfriend instead of a fisherman like Sylvester. But Sylvester was more than just a day-labouring fisherman: he drove his brother’s motorboat between Dhonam and another fishing beach close to Kisumu, and stayed with his brother in a two-storey cement house. In the village, these were signs of some degree of financial success. The fact that Sylvester really loved her became clear to Atieno during a time she was ill, when he cared for her. In addition to his love, Sylvester was also able to give Atieno a prospect for her future, something her parents could no longer guarantee, as he promised he would get her back to school once he had finished his driving course and became a professional driver in Kisumu. Below, Atieno explained the reasons why she really liked Sylvester and therefore, would also accept Sylvester's one-year-old son:

Atieno: Sylvester is really caring. I like Sylvester a lot. Yet, my aunties and uncles do not like my relationship with Sylvester. They pretend and talk badly behind my back. They want me to go out with an educated man. When it comes to issues of love, such things do not count. All I know is that I love Sylvester and Sylvester cares about me. He took care of me when I was sick. I miss [Sylvester and his son] so much and soon, I will go to visit him and come back the same day. Sylvester wrote me a very emotional letter, asking me to come back to Kisumu. I will reply to him. I asked someone to buy me a card but he has not brought it yet.

Ellen: And what do you really like about Sylvester?

Atieno: He is a nice guy, as in he is a person who cares, as in even if he is annoyed,
he tells you: “You have wronged me, you should change, to change a bit”. He does not like having many girls, and he is loving, that is all what I can say.

Ellen: Is he different maybe from the boys you knew in Thika?

Atieno: Yes, very much, because there was one time, I got sick [in his house close to Kisumu town]. There was a day, I do not want to nauseate you, but I vomited seriously. So the things I vomited on, let’s say the other clothes I vomited on, he took them out and washed them. Those things that were coming out of my body, he tried to wipe me, and he was just sitting down, consoling me like this.

Ellen: But do you see him different than the other fishermen, who are known for having many girlfriends?

Atieno: You know he has stayed in town a bit, so he is different. You know, these [other fishermen] have never stepped out of the village, so them, they have not seen a lot of things. They have not seen and do not know how town life is. Indeed they are still a bit behind. Now you know, Sylvester knows town life. Now, the way the fishermen behave, Sylvester is different from the way those fishermen behave (in-depth interview, April 2006).

Atieno married Sylvester when she was 17 years old. When I later visited the couple on various occasions, both were just hanging around, with no food in the house. But Atieno did not complain. Her story shows how young women, just like men, can end up in a relationship that makes them worse off but continue with the relationship out of pure blind love.

What do Adhis and Atieno have in common? First, both had been brought up in town and perceived villagers as being ‘backward’. They hoped to have a relationship with someone from town, or who at least had connections to town. Second, neither had future plans when they met their boyfriends. Both were stranded in the village due to lack of resources, and both were being financially supported by their boyfriend. Third, both of their relatives disapproved of their relationships and insisted on the greater value of their own economic claims. Relatives’ wishes, however, were in conflict with the young women’s ideologies of personal connection, which instead valued emotional closeness as an important measure of success in marriage (see also Wardlow and Hirsch 2006). Lastly, and not unimportant, neither had experienced an earlier sexual relationship that had left them broken hearted. This might be one of the reasons why they still believed in romantic love relationships.

7. Conclusion: The ambiguity of ‘sex, love and money’

Sex, love, and money stand in a complex, situational relationship to each other, further complicated by the intergenerational context. The key purpose of this chapter was to get
beyond stereotypical depictions of young women as having ‘survival sex’ for money and being the only one actually feeling love. Young men are also more complicated, not simply searching for satisfaction and willing to pay whatever it takes. It sounds a bit strange having to stress something seemingly obvious but the reality is that facts such as ‘young women can have sex just for fun’ and ‘young men can give money and gifts out of love’ are often ignored by the mainstream literature on HIV/AIDS. I wish to emphasise that sex, love, and money have different meanings and functions in different situations and for different people. Having said that, this variation occurs within a larger structure, which doesn’t determine the role of sex, love, or money, but does limit the options available at some points in people’s lives.

As being a youngster in Winam is often a period marked by scant economic resources, both young men and women employ creative tactics to deal with this situation and to increase their chances for a better future. On the one hand, rural young women competed to have access to men with financial means, men who preferably have connections to town. In a way one could say that they are ‘managing’ their lover(s), as they would any other resource. On the other hand, rural young men faced difficulty in competing with those who were more financially capable, and worked to ‘maintain’ their girlfriend and employed “sweet-talk” to make promises and cajole. Furthermore, in many relationships, the language of ‘love’ was often used to hide other intentions, be it money, or sex, or a ‘modern’ identity. In this way, the language of love obscures gendered structural differences. Young men struggled under the pressure of social norms that insisted they must take care of their girlfriends and wives, and not display emotions. In the difficult economic context of Winam, this was a burden for them, and many failed to live up to what both society at large and individual young women expected from them. There is a need to recognize the vulnerability of these young men, just as we must recognize that many young women—through sex, love, and money—gained access to resources and extended their social network in order to “maximize their social capital” (Thornton 2009) and to obtain financial security.

In the next chapter, I elaborate how an HIV/AIDS Prevention Project had unintended consequences. Instead of changing youngsters’ sexual behaviour, it became the best place for meeting sexual partners. While it at the end was a ‘failure’ for the youngsters, it was a ‘success’ for its management team.
The members of the Post-Test Club (PTC) of Yeshica have done an HIV test in order to become a member of the Club. Although the project staff had hoped that the PTC members would share their HIV status with each other, this was not the case with the Post-Test Club members of Yeshica. The HIV testing also was done only once, at the beginning of the group membership.

Leso is a Swahili word that is absorbed from the Portuguese language, which means ‘handkerchief’. In the Swahili language itself, the word leso is used to refer to a ‘kanga’, an artefact of the Swahili culture. Leso is a piece of printed cotton fabric, usually worn by women wrapped over their legs, as a long skirt.

Simu ya jamii is a system of sharing a cell phone, and an entrepreneurial opportunity to set up a business selling airtime via a shared handset or calling card to the local community.

Akinyi used the Kiswahili word ‘amechanuka’ for ‘enlightened, modern’.


Most of these “newcomers” are the younger sisters or younger nieces of someone who just has delivered a baby and who needs some help in the household or with the harvest. Some of these girls and young women have no experience in sex, and others enjoy the freedom they are given by their sister, away from the social control of their home, and the young men of Winam take advantage of that. Other young men, however, view these “newcomers” as potential marriage partners since they come from outside the village and are not always related by clan.

This is a double entendre meaning both “you only get one shot at it” and “you only need one time to penetrate”.

See also discussions on ‘piny okethore’ (the land is spoiled), chira, and AIDS in Chapter 5 on ‘the deaths of today’.

Both young women and young men mentioned that they could date clan members during adolescence but that marrying a clan member is not allowed due to exogamy.

MinAkinyi is probably HIV positive since she suffers from opportunistic infections, and since her husband died in 2008, probably of HIV/AIDS. Their firstborn son disappeared to another region in Kenya where they heard he got married, and Akinyi was seen as the one who will have to take care of her siblings when the parents are no longer able.

Tina Turner’s song title seems apt; it was also used by Van Eerdewijk (2006) in her article ‘The intimate relationships of Dakarois Girls’.